DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 312 819 EC 221 277

AUTHOR	Aiello, Barbara; Shulman, Jeffrey
TITLE	A Portrait of Me: Featuring Christine Kontos. The Kids on the Block Book Series.
REPORT NO	ISBN-0-941477-05-3
PUB DATE	89
NOTE	51p.; For related books, see EC 221 270-276.
AVAILABLE FROM	Twenty-First Century Books, 38 South Market St., Frederick, MD 21701 ($12.95).
PUB TYPE	Creative Works (Literature,Drama,Fine Arts) (030) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Materials (For Learner) (051) -- Books (010)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	Books; *Childhood Attitudes; Childrens Literature; *Diabetes; *Diseases; Elementary Education; Fiction; Peer Acceptance; Self Concept; *Special Health Problems

ABSTRACT

One of a series of children's books written from the point of view of an elementary grade child with a disability or other problem, the stories emphasize the similarities in childhood experience while providing information specific to the disability. In this book, 11-year-old Christine copes successfully with her diabetes but finds it much more difficult to come to terms with the demands of her Greek-American heritage. After the story, a question and answer section provides answers (by Christine) of typical questions children often have about diabetes. These include: "What is diabetes?" "Is there a cure?" "Why is exercise so important?" "Why do you give yourself shots of insulin?" "How can you give yourself shots? Isn't it disgusting?" "Doesn't it hurt?" "Can you get AIDS from using a needle?" "How did you get diabetes?" "Why can't you eat candy or other sweet things?" "Once you needed emergency candy. Why?" "How do you know if your sugar level is right?" "Is it hard to have diabetes?" (DB)

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THE KIDS ON THE BLOCK BOOK SERIES

A Portrait Of Me

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Barbara Aiello and Jeffrey Shulman
Illustrated by Loel Barr

A Portrait Of Me

Meet
CHRISTINE

Birthday: April 12

Best friends:
- Joanne Spinoza
- Diane Delaney
- Aristotle "Ari" Kontos
  ("My brother from Mars!")

Hobbies:
- Ballet, ballet, ballet
- Checkers with Grandfather

Sports:
- Volleyball
- Aerobics

Favorite food (Yum!):
- Hamburgers
- French fries
- Oranges and grapefruits
  ("Good for needle practice")

Favorite subjects:
- Art
- Music and Dance
- Reading

Yuck!:
- Arguing with Ari
- Greek leftovers
- A messy fridge
  ("Who moved my insulin *now*?")

Christine Kontos

THE KIDS ON THE BLOCK BOOK SERIES

A Portrait Of Me

Featuring Christine Kontos

Barbara Aiello and Jeffrey Shulman
Illustrated by Loel Barr

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BOOKS
FREDERICK, MARYLAND

Twenty-First Century Books
38 South Market Street
Frederick, Maryland 21701

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Printed in the United States of America

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Special Sales:

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Aiello, Barbara

A portrait of me: featuring Christine Kontos / by Barbara Aiello and Jeffrey Shulman; illustrated by Loel Barr.

(The Kids on the Block book series)

Summary: Eleven-year-old Christine copes successfully with her diabetes but finds it much more difficult to come to terms with the demands of her Greek-American heritage. Includes a section of questions and answers about diabetes and its treatment.

ISBN 0-941477-05-3

[1. Greek Americans — Fiction. 2. Diabetes — Fiction.]
I. Shulman, Jeffrey, 1951— . II. Barr, Loel, ill. III. Title.
IV. Series: Aiello, Barbara. Kids on the Block book series.
PZ7.A26924Po 1989 89-32318 CIP AP
[Fic]—dc20

To the children who teach us about differences—
and similarities

Dear Reader:

Who are The Kids on the Block? They are kids like you. They like to do the same things you do. They share your hopes and fears. And like you, they have differences. You'll meet kids who are blind or have cerebral palsy. You'll meet kids who are deaf or have asthma. And you'll meet kids whose lives have been changed by divorce or drugs.

In The Kids on the Block Book Series, you'll find their stories. You'll read stories about friendship and growing up, stories about changes and challenges. But you won't read about kids who are dependent, and you won't read about superheroes, either. The Kids on the Block are regular kids leading regular lives.

"I'm not an epileptic," one kid says. "I'm a person with epilepsy." And that is the point. These kids are people: different in the same ways that we are all different, alike in the same ways that we are all alike.

We hope you enjoy their stories.

Barbara Aiello
Jeffrey Shulman

CHAPTER 1

"We came on a boat that had been a coal ship. The conditions were very, very bad. And the weather was so terrible. The food was worse. But we managed to get here. We were allowed to go to Ellis Island. We were herded like sheep there to be examined, all very fearful that we might not be found healthy enough, that we might be sent back. My father referred to Ellis Island as the Palace of Tears because everyone was so fearful.

It was crowded. Ours was not the only immigrant ship. People were coming to the United States in droves from everywhere. Because this was the promised land.

This was the place for us."

"Did you find anything interesting?" Grandfather whispered in my ear.

His voice seemed to come out of the pages I was reading: from the long, fearful lines at Ellis Island, the place where so many people took their first step on American soil; from the ships crowded with hundreds of poor immigrants; from the little Greek villages where others waited their turn to make the hard and painful trip. Of course, it couldn't be. I knew that.

His voice sounded funny and different to me. I thought for a moment that I was hearing it for the very first time. But that couldn't be, I said to myself. It couldn't be.

Why was it, then, that when I looked up into the wrinkled eyes of my Grandfather, even his face was not the same? It, too, seemed to come out of the past, out of the many frightened and yet hopeful faces I had been looking at. Faces of Greeks, Italians,

Poles, Russians. Faces worn by weeks of the terrible journey. Faces lifted up to the promise of a new life.

"Oh, yes," I said, "I found so much."

Ellis Island. It was like some sort of magical place where the past still lives today. You know, like a time machine, where you can go back, back, back, and see what your grandparents were like when they were children. You can see their faces and read their stories. And you can see beyond that. You can see their homes and families, their parents and grandparents. You can see a long way back.

Okay, Christine, I wondered, what's going on here? What's all this looking back stuff? You're the one who's always looking ahead. You're the one who's going to be building the America of tomorrow. What about that little sign on your bedroom door: "Christine Kontos, Architect of the American Dream"? What's going on here? Christine, I thought, are you feeling all right?

Ellis Island. Its name was like some sort of magical spell. An island hidden in the misty past.

And I *had* found a lot, too. I guess you could say I found a portrait of me. Oh, I know, that doesn't make any sense. Well, it's complicated. Why don't I just start at the beginning?

CHAPTER 2

But where is the beginning?

Maybe when Ms. Shaw announced the theme for the winter dance recital. Or maybe when Ari and I had the big fight. Or—oh, I can't figure out beginnings anymore. I'll just start with me.

I'm Christine Kontos. I'm eleven years old and in the fifth grade at Woodburn School. I like art, music, and English, but what I really like the best is dance. Ballet. Especially, modern ballet. My best friend is Joanne Spinoza. She is fourteen, but what I like most about Joanne is that she never makes me *feel* eleven. She says I'm "a mature eleven-year-old." Isn't that great?

I have a family, of course. (Boy, do I ever have a family!) There's my Mom and Dad, my two sisters (Mary and Iantha), my three brothers (Ari, Peter, and Marc), my Grandfather and my Grandmother, one dog (Zeus), two cats (Mercury and Hera), and—oh, that's it. Well, that's enough, isn't it?

Most people know my Dad as Woodburn's "Coach" Kontos. But when he's not in his sweat suit, he really is an architect. "That's Greek," he likes to point out to me. "It means 'a master builder.'" A master builder: I love the sound of that. I remember when I told Dad I wanted to be an architect, too.

"Must be your Greek roots popping out at last," he laughed.

"What do you mean?" I asked. He was always making me sound like some sort of plant or something.

"The Greeks," he said, his index finger pointed in the air, "were master builders." He always speaks with that finger in the air. As a matter of fact, everybody in my family seems to speak with their hands. I tease my friend Mandy (she's deaf) that my

family has its own sign language. Old World Greek, I call it. "Master builders," Dad was saying. "Look at the Parthenon."

"The Parthenon?" I asked. "Dad, you have to be kidding. I mean, I'm sure the Parthenon was okay in its day. But that day was a long, long time ago. The Parthenon must be a thousand years old."

"Actually," Dad said, "it's more like 2,500 years old."

"Just my point," I said, with *my* index finger high in the air. (So sometimes I speak Old World Greek, too. In this family you just can't help it. You have to be heard, don't you?) "Look at the World Trade Center, look at the Sears Tower," I said. "Now, that's master building."

"Maybe," Dad replied. "And, maybe, we'll have to wait 2,500 years to know for sure."

You never actually *win* an argument with a Kontos.

My Mom owns a restaurant—it's a Greek restaurant, of course—with my grandparents. The Olive Branch, it's called. It used to be called Kontos's Athenian Palace. That was before Mom and my grandparents remodeled it last year and gave it a brand new look, and a brand new name to match. Still, it's the same old Greek restaurant to me. I work there sometimes on the weekends. That's what the fight with Ari was all about. But hold on, I'll get to that.

Mom loves to cook Greek foods, like spanakopita, moussaka, souvlakia, dolmades—and lots of other strange dishes with strange names. "It's not the foods so much," she explained to me, "it's the traditions behind them. It's the spirit of the old country. It's a way of life I love and want to remember."

"Sure, Mom," I said in halfhearted agreement. But what it meant to me was lots of Greek leftovers. Lamb and pilaf and feta cheese, then more lamb and pilaf and feta cheese. "Why

couldn't we be Italian?" I asked one night at dinner. "At least, then, we could be eating leftover pizza." The only Greek food I really like is baklava. It's like a pastry, with nuts wrapped in a special Greek dough, and it's topped with a delicious honey syrup. But I'm not supposed to eat it because of my diabetes. Leftovers and diabetes: that's what the Greek way of life used to mean to me.

Of course, you'll want to hear about my fight with Ari. But that's a long story. And what has all this got to do with Ellis Island? Just hold on. I'm getting there.

CHAPTER 3

It all started in dance class about a month ago.

"But let me make this clear," Ms. Shaw warned, trying to speak above all the excitement. "If you want to be in this year's dance recital, be prepared to work. W O R K. Work." Ms. Shaw liked to spell things out for us. It was kind of a pain. P A I N. Pain. But she was a wonderful teacher. I had been taking ballet lessons with her for nearly a year, a year of practicing all of the basic exercises: plié, and battement, rond de jambe à terre, and adagio—oh, I had practiced and practiced till I dreamed ballet. Sometimes I just wanted to scream, "Enough of exercises! I want to fly! I want to soar!"

"You may develop your own routine," Ms. Shaw was saying, "but remember our theme for this year's recital: 'A Portrait of You.' Here is your chance, boys and girls, to express yourself in dance. A chance to create a living portrait of you. Y O U. You."

Ms. Shaw suggested that we keep a dance notebook, a place to write down all our thoughts about our special portrait.

M E. Me. A portrait of me. What would it be? Whatever it was, I wanted it to be fresh and exciting and alive. I wanted it to tell the world who I was. I wanted it to say, "Look out! Here's something new, something unexpected. Here's Christine Kontos!" I wanted to take the world by surprise. I wanted to soar!

"Great news, everybody," I announced, as I soared into the kitchen of The Olive Branch. I worked there on weekends and sometimes after school, doing odd jobs in the kitchen, maybe helping clear the tables, and just generally trying to stay out of the way. It was a pretty busy place. I tried to convince Mom that working in a Greek restaurant would be bad for my diabetes—you know, I have to be real careful about what I eat and when I eat it.

"But, Christine," Mom observed, "you don't even like Greek food. Help me grate some more cheese, will you?"

I told you, you *never* win an argument with a Kontos.

"Great news, everybody," I exclaimed, "I'm going to be in Ms. Shaw's Christmas dance recital."

"That really is good news," my Grandma said. "I'll bet you're very pleased, Christina." Always Christina, I thought. When will I be plain old Christine to my grandparents?

"And I'll bet you will be the best one there." That was my Grandfather. He always thought I would be the best one, no matter what the occasion. "But I just have to tell you, Christina," he went on, "you've got those socks with no feet on again." He meant my leg warmers, of course. He was always kidding me about my exercise outfits. "Stella," he would say to my mother, "you'd think such a smart girl would know how to wear socks."

"Poppa," Mom would laugh, "she's a regular modern girl."

I told them all about the "Portrait of You" theme for the show. I told them how Ms. Shaw said it would be a chance to express myself in dance. I didn't have to tell them how excited I was. "But it'll be a lot of work," I explained. "We'll have to practice on Saturdays to get ready."

And that's what started the fight.

"But you're supposed to work here on Saturdays, Chris," Ari complained. Ari was my older brother, fifteen big years old. He loved the restaurant. He loved its spicy smell, the smell of basil and thyme, of marjoram and oregano. I was pretty much a hamburger and french fries girl myself. And so we'd fight over that. Ari couldn't understand why I didn't want to spend my afternoons peeling potatoes and washing spinach.

But it went deeper than that. Ari loved the old Greek ways. He was so much like my Grandfather, everyone said. And it was true. Sometimes, when I looked at Ari, I thought, "There goes my little grandfather." And I used to tell my friends that Ari was "fifteen and going on fifty." I thought he was old when he should be young. He was working when he should be free. Who knows what he thought of me?

"Well, I just won't be able to, Ari," I said back.

"That's typical."

"Typical of what?"

"Typical of you, that's what. Typical of your attitude. You're too busy to help. You've got too many important things to do."

"Children, please," interrupted Mom, "enough of this."

"Ari," Grandfather said in a comforting way, "it's all right. If Christina has other things to do, be happy for her. Let her do them. The restaurant is not for everybody."

"Nothing is," Grandmother added in a grandmotherly way.

"I guess," Ari grumbled. But you could tell he didn't mean it. He was simmering away like Mom's lentil soup. "I guess," he said again, "but it isn't fair. It's . . . it's . . . disloyal."

Disloyal? That was too much. I wasn't going to stand for it. "What is this?" I asked. "It's not disloyal to want to live my own life. I have my own dreams. And working here is just not part of them. I'm not interested in Greek foods and Greek this and Greek that. And I don't want to be stuck in some stupid Greek restaurant for the rest of my life!"

That quieted things in a hurry. I felt terrible the minute I said it. I meant to hurt Ari, but I knew I had hurt Mom and my grandparents, too. Now, I *felt* disloyal. I wanted to say, "I didn't really mean it that way," but it wouldn't have done any good. The quiet was too deep for that.

CHAPTER 4

Let me tell you about Aristotle Kontos. When I was little and scared to give myself insulin shots, Ari used to stand by my side and tell me funny stories to make me laugh. I learned to give myself shots by practicing on grapefruits and oranges, and it was Ari's idea to draw weird faces on them and pretend they were "fruit from Mars." He was the only one who could really make me accept my diabetes.

Ari made me feel like a regular member of the family. It wasn't easy, not being able to eat ice cream, sugary doughnuts—those kinds of things. But it was Ari who said, "If Chris can't have sweets, then neither will the rest of us." Well, it was also Ari who didn't last too long ("What?" he used to scream, "fruit again for dessert?"), but it was nice of him to try anyway. Sometimes, I'd reach into the fridge for a piece of fruit, and *all* the apples and oranges or whatever would have weird faces on them. My brother from Mars!

He used to say I was born stubborn. I remember when Ari would try to "tickle some sense" into me. Until the time I told him I was too old for that and quite sensible enough, thank you.

It was Ari who brought a scruffy looking puppy home from the pound. And it was Ari who taught me, and my brothers and sisters, how to take care of our new little ball of fur. It was Ari who named him Zeus.

I thought the world of Ari.

Now, I fight with him all the time. Why was he always angry with me? Why was I always angry with him? Only, it wasn't just with Ari, and that's what bothered me. It was with Mom, and

Grandma, and Grandfather, and The Olive Branch and—well, it seemed like I was fighting everyone and everything I knew.

But that was just the beginning. Believe me.

"Are you mad at me, Grandfather?" I asked quietly. We were in the kitchen, where I was helping him make a cucumber salad. Grandfather was old, and the creases and folds in his wrinkled skin made me think of getting old. But his hands were still swift and sure.

"Cut the cucumbers in cubes," he said. "No, of course not. I wish you and your brother wouldn't fight like cats and dogs."

"That's not what I mean," I replied.

"Well, what do you mean?" he asked. "Put the cubes in those big bowls while I get the yogurt."

"I mean, what I said about the restaurant. I didn't really mean it that way."

"Oh, I know you didn't. Now, don't worry yourself about that. Listen to your grandfather. It's like your mother said: you're a regular modern girl. Let's chop the garlic. But is that so different from my own parents? They left the old country to find a new life in America. They wanted that life for their children and grandchildren and"—Grandfather stopped his chopping for a moment and studied my face—"and their great-grandchildren." He placed his hand on my cheek. "I wish my mother could see this beautiful face. Because she would know that all the suffering, all the hardship, was worth it. I wish my father could hear you talk about being an architect. 'Imagine that,' I can hear him saying, 'Nico Kontos's great-granddaughter is an architect. An architect in America.' He would be so proud. We'll need the mint and the lemon juice. Don't forget the olive oil."

Grandfather was thinking about old, old times. I imagined him sitting in the square of his little hillside village, a little boy wondering what America was like. And if he would ever see it. "When my parents brought me to America," he went on, "they had dreams, too. But do you think they left Greece behind? No. They left family there. They left friends there. They left a life there. You can't just leave that behind. So you hold onto the old ways, the way you hold onto your memories. You can't just let them go."

"That's just it, Grandfather," I insisted, "they're memories. They're the past. I want more than memories. I have dreams for the future, Grandfather. Is there anything wrong with that?"

Grandfather was studying my face again. "Of course not," he replied. "Every family needs a dreamer. You be our dreamer, Christina." But I couldn't tell if he really meant it, or if he was just saying that for me. "But not our *day*dreamer," he finished. "Add the garlic, mint, and lemon juice to the yogurt. Just the right amount of oil, salt, and pepper. Pour the sauce over the cucumber. And there you have it: the best cucumber salad outside of Athens." It probably was, too. "Now, there's something to dream about," he said with pride and pleasure.

There was a funny sound in Grandfather's voice. I couldn't put my finger on it, but, trust me, it was there.

And, for a long time, I could still feel Grandfather's hand on my cheek.

CHAPTER 5

Practice, practice, and more practice. I tell you: when Ms. Shaw spelled out work, she was not kidding around. I knew getting ready for the recital was going to be hard, but I didn't think it was going to be *this* hard.

When I wasn't practicing dance, I was talking dance with Joanne or my other friends, and when I wasn't practicing or talking dance, I was thinking dance. I kept my notebook with me all the time. I even got in the habit of sort of singing softly to myself, "A Portrait of Me: What Could It Be?" It was really the only thing on my mind. Ari thought it was pretty weird, but, of course, he would. Come to think of it, it *was* pretty weird.

Well, what could my portrait be? One thing I did was to ask Mom and Dad and everyone what *they* thought. I put their ideas in my dance notebook.

From my father: "I see a dance vision of Christine Kontos, the world's greatest architect. I see a lone figure on the stage slowly rising to tower magnificently above the landscape. Say, that's pretty good, isn't it?" Right, Dad. I mean, let's not get too carried away or anything.

From my mother: "What about a modern routine? Combining ballet with some jazz steps and, maybe, aerobics. It would be perfect for you." Now, that *was* pretty good.

From Ari: "How about 'The Dance of a Pig-Headed Mule'?" Thank you, Ari. That was very helpful.

From my Grandmother: "Well, Christina, I think the most important thing is for you just to be yourself." It's Christine, Grandma, Christine.

From my Grandfather: "The goat dance of Greece. I'll bet it's the first time these people will see real Greek folk dancing. And who better to show it to them than a Kontos? Can you do that?" Maybe another time, Grandfather.

Now, where should I start? It seemed that everyone had a different idea of me. I guess the important thing was, what did *I* think of me, but I was more puzzled about that than ever. I used my notebook to help me sort out my thoughts. I wrote down all my favorite things to do. All my favorite foods. Favorite songs. Favorite people. One time I even tried to write down all the words I would use to describe myself. I had just about worn myself out with adjectives when I heard Mom calling.

"Christine." I was staring from my bedroom window at the last rays of the red-gold December sunset. "Almost dinner time."

"Okay," I hollered back. Time to give myself a shot of insulin. I have to do that twice a day, you know, but it only takes me a minute now. (Hey, maybe I could do "The Dance of the Human Pincushion." Well, maybe not.) I was thinking of the first time I gave myself a shot, how scary it was. Not anymore, I thought. I was about to go downstairs, but, first, I wrote one more word in my notebook: "fearless."

Thanks, Ari.

CHAPTER 6

Where do fights start? I'm no expert in fights, but I think they're like icebergs. You know how you only see the tip of an iceberg, but underneath it's super big and dangerous. Fights are like that. You only see the tip of the fight, and what you're fighting about may seem small and silly. But, underneath, where it really matters, there's a monster iceberg just waiting, waiting, waiting for you.

"Great, great news, everybody," I said, as we sat down to a Kontos Friday night dinner. I was soaring again. I was so excited I thought I might never get my feet back on the ground. I felt like a helium balloon. "I'm going to the ballet. I'm going to the Joffrey Ballet!"

Let me tell you about a Kontos Friday night. It was, without doubt, the best night of the week. We had Friday night dinner with Grandma and Grandfather. There was lamb and pilaf and feta cheese, of course ("Not again," I'd complain), and there was laughter and friendship and . . . and family. Old World Greek sign language flashed everywhere. And there were funny stories about the restaurant. There were even funnier stories about the old country. The old country. The way my grandparents talked about it, they made it sound like a dream—the kind you try to remember all day long, but it's always just a little out of reach. Sometimes, there was even a song or two.

"Slow down, Chris," Mom said. "Tell us all about it."

"The Joffrey Ballet will be here in January, and"—

"What's the Jeffrey Ballet?" Ari asked.

"Joffrey. The Joffrey Ballet, you knucklehead," I said.

"Hey, who are you calling"—

"All right, all right, you two," Mom stepped in, "let's not get started. Christine, we can do without the names, please."

"The Joffrey Ballet is my favorite. And Ms. Shaw wants to take the whole class. Can I go, Mom? Can I? Oh, please say yes."

"Well, I don't see why not," she replied. That was as good as a yes, wasn't it? They were going to have to tie me to the ground with a rope.

Ari wasn't too happy, you could tell. Just what is it with big brothers, anyway? They're like pins, always ready to burst your bubble. "I still think it's a funny name," he said.

"You would, *Aristotle* Kontos," I said.

He was getting angry. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You figure it out!" Well, I had a right to get angry, too.

"Can we *please* get through one dinner without a fight," Dad said impatiently. "Why don't we try it tonight and see how we like it? Just this once. Okay?"

Okay, Dad. But what about that nice iceberg there? Don't you see it? You know, the one with the Kontos name on it. *The one we're about to hit.* Ladies and gentlemen, to the lifeboats, please. Hurry, now.

Grandfather tried to steer our dinner into calmer waters. He would always ask how we spent our week. "The Weekly Update," he called it. "Ari," he began, "what's the good news with you?"

"I'm still working on my history report about immigration, Grandfather." Oh, that stupid report. That's the only thing Ari has talked about for weeks. "It's not just numbers and dates and stuff like that, though. I want to understand what it was *really* like. I want to write down the stories you and Grandma tell, and show people how it felt to leave everything behind for a strange,

new country, what it felt like to . . . to . . . well, to see the Statue of Liberty for the first time."

It figures, doesn't it? When we were little, we went to see the Statue of Liberty. It was a wet and foggy day. I remember how miserable the cold drizzle made me feel. That's about all I want to remember.

"And, you, Christina," Grandfather turned his attention to me, "you had big news today, didn't you?"

Just thinking about the ballet got me excited again. I told Grandfather all about the Joffrey. "It's like a dream come true," I said.

"And when is the ballet, Christina?" Grandmother asked. It was a simple question. Or so I thought at the time.

"January 6th," I said. It was a simple answer. At least, I thought so at the time.

Have you ever heard the sound of complete silence? It's the sound you hear just before your lovely ship of dreams hits the biggest iceberg in the ocean.

"January 6th?" Mom asked.

"Why, yes," I said, "January 6th."

"But, Chris," she said with surprise, "you know January 6th is the Feast of the Epiphany. I'm afraid you"—

I didn't hear the rest of it, but I didn't have to hear it to know that I was shipwrecked. I had forgotten that January 6th was the Epiphany. How I forgot that I don't know. You see, my family's religion is Greek Orthodox, and for us January 6th is a very special holiday. One of our Christmas holidays. I guess I was just so busy with the dance recital that . . . well, that I forgot. I just forgot.

"I'm sorry, Christine," Mom finally said.

I didn't know what to say. But I had to say something, didn't I? "But nobody celebrates January 6th. Why can't we just have a normal holiday, like everyone else? Why do we always have to be different?"

"We *do* have a normal Christmas," Ari insisted.

"You stay out of this, Ari," I shouted. The last thing I needed now was for him to butt in. "Can't I miss it just this once?"

"I'm afraid not," Dad said. "You know how important"—

"I know how important the ballet is, too. It's not like this is a *real* religious holiday. I can see my gifts when I get home. Nobody else"—

"She's embarrassed to be Greek," Ari said. "That's what this is all about."

"Ari," Mom tried to say, "this is not"—

"I am not," I said back to Ari. "I am not."

"There they go again," my sister Mary complained. "Like a broken record."

"I wish it *were* broken," sighed Mom. "You two fight worse than Zeus and Hera." When Zeus heard his name, he barked in agreement.

"Isn't anybody on my side?" I cried out.

"It's not a question of sides, Christina," Grandma said. "It's a holy day for us, the day the three kings brought their gifts to the child Jesus."

I felt like screaming, "I know, Grandma, I know. I've heard it a thousand times." But I didn't dare.

Grandma continued. "They traveled for days and days to show their love. I think we can give up one day to show ours. That's what the Epiphany is all about, Christina. It's more than getting gifts. It's about the gift of giving. I'm surprised at you."

"Your grandmother is right, Christine Kontos," Mom said firmly. "This is not a question of sides. It's a question of family. Like it or not, you're still a part of this family, and you will be for quite some time. I'm sorry. I wish you could go to the ballet. I know what it means to you. But you can't. And that's final."

"It's not fair!" I said, as I stormed off to my room. "And it's not final!"

CHAPTER 7

It was a rainy Saturday, and I was stuck inside. What I usually do on a rainy-Saturday-stuck-inside day is talk on the phone. Just to a few friends. You know, just for a few hours. About everything. And nothing. It drives everyone crazy.

But not today. Today, I stayed in my room. I was angry at the whole world. And it seemed like the whole world was angry at me.

I heard a knock on the door. It was Grandfather. "Excuse me," he said, "but has anyone seen my old checkers partner?" That was me. I loved to play checkers with Grandfather. We would sit by the window, with the checkerboard between us, and Zeus (ever since he was a puppy) would curl up by our feet. Grandfather would tell stories about growing up in Greece. Once in a while, we would even play checkers. And once in a while, he let me win.

"You know, Christina," Grandfather said between moves, "I have to go to New York soon for business. I don't see why you couldn't come along. We could do a little sightseeing. Maybe even take in a ballet."

"Really, Grandfather?"

"Really," he said. "If your mother and father don't mind."

"Oh, that would be great!" I exclaimed. "The ballet in New York! Things are going to work out, after all."

"Of course, they are," Grandfather replied, softly patting my cheek. "They always do, don't they?" But there was that funny sound in his voice again. He sounded, somehow, worried.

"Thanks to you, Grandfather," I answered.

He was quiet for a moment. "Not thanks to me," he finally said with a sigh. "I can take you to the ballet, but I can't bring peace to this family. I can't"—

"But I don't understand," I interrupted. "Why can't everyone leave me alone? Why is it always the past? Why is it always the family? Why can't I just be myself?"

"Yourself?" asked Grandfather. "Well, who are you if not part of a family? Where do you come from if not from your family?"

"I want to know where I'm going, not where I come from. Is that so horrible?"

"No, I suppose not," he said.

"Why can't Ari understand that?"

"He understands," Grandfather replied. "He's proud of you."

"Well, he has a strange way of showing it," I said.

Grandfather laughed a little. "I guess that's true."

"It's because he lives in the past, Grandfather. That's why he hates me."

"Ari doesn't hate you, Christina. He loves you, even if he does have a strange way of showing it. I think he's just a little afraid, that's all."

"Afraid of what?" I asked.

"Maybe he's afraid that if he lets go of the past, he'll lose something he wants to hold onto. Maybe something he wants to hold onto too much."

"Maybe," I muttered. It didn't make sense to me. I was tired of the whole business. Why couldn't Grandfather get Ari off my back? He knew it was Ari's problem, after all. But before I was able to ask Grandfather to talk to Ari, he spoke first.

"And what are *you* afraid of, Christina?" Grandfather asked.

CHAPTER 8

Monday was the worst day of my life. It's funny. The one day I'd like so much to forget is the day I remember so clearly.

I had to explain to Ms. Shaw why I couldn't see the ballet. "There will be other times, Christine," she said.

"I guess so" was my sullen response.

"Maybe you could become Jewish, like me," my friend Leslie suggested. "Then, your parents would have to let you go."

I didn't think they'd go for that one.

I was on my way home from school, just a block from our house. I was walking with Joanne. Joanne and I were on the safety patrol at Woodburn. She was on the senior patrol; I was a junior aide. We were still wearing our bright orange belts. It hadn't been a great day. I got so tired and dizzy on the safety patrol, I had to sit down and eat some emergency candy. The "candy cure," Joanne calls it. I guess (I mean, I *know*) I should have eaten all my lunch. I was just so busy.

I felt better on the way home, though. Joanne was talking nonstop about some new boy she met, but I wasn't paying much attention. I was thinking about the recital ("What could it be?"), I was thinking about New York, I was thinking about me.

Oh, Christine, why weren't you paying attention?

It all happened so quickly. I saw Zeus bounding up the block to meet me. He always does. He was so happy to see me, and I was just as happy to see him. He waits on our side of the street. He always does. Together, we run the rest of the way home.

But somehow today was different. Today, Zeus didn't wait. (But he always does!) I saw him leap into the street. (Why didn't he wait?) I heard the terrible screech of brakes. There was nothing I could do. I heard the terrible sound of Zeus's yelp.

"Oh, God, please don't let him die." Over and over I prayed to myself, leaning over Zeus, "Oh, God, please don't let him die." He was hurt really bad.

Joanne raced to my house to get help. I saw Ari running. "Oh, Ari," I was crying, "please don't let him die."

"Let me take you to the vet," the man who drove the car said. Ari picked Zeus up and held him so gently. And Joanne sat beside me.

We waited and waited while the vet tried to help Zeus. But when he came out at last, "I'm sorry" was all he said.

I cried like a baby. I didn't want to. I didn't want to act like a little kid, but I couldn't help myself. Joanne tried to put her arm around me, but it wasn't Joanne I needed then. That day, I cried like a baby in my brother's arms.

Later that night, Ari came to my room. "Mind if I come in?" he asked.

Of course, I didn't mind. We might fight like cats and dogs, but, somehow, I always knew that when I really needed him, Ari would be there.

Ari and I sat together in my room for a long time that night. The quiet seemed to grow around us, the way stars come out one by one till the sky is filled with them.

I was thinking about Zeus when he was a puppy. How he used to hide when it was time for his bath. How he tried to make friends with our cats, Mercury and Hera. How he nuzzled me awake in the morning with his cold nose. How he grew and grew. "That dog is eating us out of house and home," Dad used to say. But Dad loved him, too.

"It's hard to believe," I said, "that Zeus is gone. Just like that. Just this morning I was playing with him. And, now, it's all memories. That's all that's left. Memories."

The moon rose white in the dark night sky.

"That's a lot," Ari said quietly.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I wish I could explain, Chris. But I really don't know how. Grandfather says that growing up means changes—some good, some not so good. You know, Chris, he's seen so many changes in his life. More than I can imagine. More than I ever want to see. Maybe I'm afraid of so many changes."

Ari stopped and took my hand. "Nothing lasts forever, Chris. Except our memories. Maybe that's why I feel so strongly about our family and roots. Maybe that's why I get so angry with you. I mean, I know I'm old-fashioned." Ari paused again, while we both felt the quiet of the bright winter night. "Maybe that's why I wrote my report on Ellis Island."

Ari and I sat together in my room for a long time that night. When he left, I thought about a lot of things. I thought about Zeus and how gently Ari held him. I thought about Grandfather, the way he put his hand on my cheek, the funny, worried sound in his voice.

I knocked quietly on Ari's door.

"Come in," I heard him say. I opened the door halfway and stuck my head inside.

"What's up, Chris?" he said.

"Can I read it?" I asked. "Can I read your report?"

CHAPTER 9

I told you I couldn't figure out beginnings anymore. You might say reading Ari's report was a new beginning for me.

Voices from Ellis Island
by Aristotle Kontos

Nothing shows the spirit of America better than the Statue of Liberty. For millions of immigrant Americans it meant a dream come true. It meant that they had, at last, reached the land of promise, the land of their hopes and dreams.

Ellis Island is a small spot of land in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty. For 15 million new Americans, it was their entrance way to a new world and a new life.

Many years later, hundreds of these newcomers to America remembered the most important trip of their lives. They spoke of their old homes and their journey to a new home. This is the true voice of Ellis Island.

What was so neat about Ari's report was that he used the real words, and real pictures, of the people who came to America, people whose first steps in their new land were through the great halls of Ellis Island. I noticed right away all the different names: Tartarini, Blau, Devlin, Vasily, Nagy, Chletsos, Berger, and on and on. Names of Poles, Russians, Slavs, Irish, Greeks, Italians. Names that told a hundred different stories. Names that all told the same story.

And they were so young when they came over. Just my age, many of them. They had to leave their families and their friends. "*I remember how many nights I used to cry*," one woman said, "*but it had to be done*." It had to be done? Could I ever do that? I tried to imagine myself making that long and lonely voyage. Where would I find the courage?

They remembered the awful trip on the ships. They lived for weeks in steerage, in the bottom of the boat, where it was dirty and crowded. There was always bad food and sometimes bad weather. But they tried to make the best of it. One woman (she was Greek) remembered one "bright night on the deck":

> *"I was born with the music in my body. When they have this big doings in the villages, they would dress me in the little Grecian outfits, and I danced. That night, there was such a bright night on the deck. So they say, 'How about you, little girl? You know how to dance?' I say, 'You bet I know how to dance.' I never forget that. I was the life of the party."*

They remembered when they first saw the Statue of Liberty:

> *"It was a most beautiful thing. The torch was burning. I still remember the light. I keep on looking and looking. And a man came to me and says, 'What is it, girl?' I says, 'Do you know this Statue of Liberty? Do you know what it means?' He says, 'It's just a statue.' I says, 'No. That's the freedom of the world. This lady opens her arms for people. We come from all over the world. The torch up there: it says, Welcome.' I stayed there for over two hours just staring at her. I thought it was the prettiest thing I ever seen in my life."*

They remembered being herded into long lines to be questioned and examined. Some remembered being separated from their families, perhaps forever.

They told about their new lives. Learning a new language, learning new ways. But they didn't forget the old ways. It was like Grandfather said: they were dreamers like me, but they held onto their memories, too. Dad says that the taller a building you want to make, the deeper a foundation you have to dig. It was that way with them. Their memories gave them the strength to dream new dreams for the future:

> *"If you drop everything of your own kind, it's like cutting off part of you. You may be able to do without your arm, but is it the best thing for you to do? You need both arms, both legs. My son Michael brings up his Greek background all the time.*
>
> *I'm an American in America, in the United States. When something is Greek, the Greek comes out in me. I speak Greek with those who speak Greek with me. In the church it's Greek. We have certain customs we celebrate, and I feel Greek then. So I'm really part of both lives.*
>
> *Should I throw away the Greek? It's part of our lives. It's part of our roots. Otherwise, I couldn't be a whole person. My son feels the Greek in him. It is a big dimension in his life. And it should be that way. How about his children? Even they have a little feeling and knowledge. I have tried to give them a background because I feel it's a strength to know your roots. It gives you a sense of security."*

The past really is part of you. We *are* born with what has come before.

"Did you find anything interesting?" Grandfather whispered in my ear.

"Grandfather, I didn't hear you come in," I said.

"That's what happens when you get so involved in your reading," he said. "Ari tells me you asked to read his report. Did you find anything interesting?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "I found so much." I told you, I found a portrait of me. I don't know if I can put it into the right words, words that will make sense, but I understood . . . no, I felt, for the first time, how much a part of my own life the past really was. It's like this: I want to be an architect or a ballet star or whatever, and maybe I will be it and maybe I won't be, but I have that chance because my parents and my grandparents and my great-grandparents gave me that chance. And I will give that chance to my children, too, when I teach them how to dream—and when I teach them how to remember.

CHAPTER 10

"Ladies and gentlemen," Ari announced, "it is my very great pleasure to present the newest wonder in the world of dance. Here to entertain you, here to enthrall you: direct from her bedroom—Christine Kontos."

"For goodness sake, Ari," I whispered from the hallway, "it's only a rehearsal."

It was time to show my family "A Portrait of Me." I knew it was only a rehearsal, but I was nervous anyway. I mean, if *they* didn't like it, who would?

A portrait of me: so what could it be?

"I call my performance 'Christine Kontos: Past, Present, and Future,' " I said to my family audience. "It's 'A Portrait of Me.' I hope you like it. Thank you."

I had been working on my dance for days. It really was a portrait of me. I thought about what Grandfather had asked. You know, what was I afraid of. I didn't know the answer yet, but I did know that ever since I was little, ever since I found out I had diabetes, I didn't want to be babied by anyone. I didn't want to depend on other people for help. I wanted to be independent. Well, maybe I was too independent. Maybe I was afraid to need other people. I didn't know the whole answer yet, but I did know that my family was more important than a ballet (even if it was the Joffrey). I knew that my family wanted me to be a part of it. And I knew that I wanted to be a part of it, too.

My dance had three parts. (Ms. Shaw helped me find the right music, and Grandma made me a very special costume.) It began with the movements and rhythms of Greek folk dances that Grandfather showed me. I wore the traditional dress of the Greek countryside. Then, lo and behold, I was transformed (more of Grandma's magic costume) into a ballerina and danced to the music of *The Nutcracker Suite.* But I didn't stop there. With a flourish of my hand, I left my ballerina costume on the floor, and there was the modern Christine in tights and leotard dancing to "Bad" by Michael Jackson.

All that in fifteen minutes. I was exhausted. "Well, what did you think?" I asked when I finished, breathless with excitement.

"Wonderful," said Grandma.

"You'll be the best one there," Grandfather said. Well, what did you expect him to say?

"It was just about the weirdest thing I ever saw in my life," Ari said. I gave him a dirty look. "But I liked it! I liked it!"

"It was very good, Christine," Mom said. I thought she was going to cry.

"Bravo! Bravo!" Dad exclaimed. "A virtuoso performance. This calls for a celebration. How about dinner out tonight?"

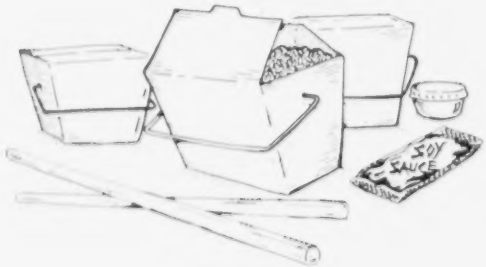
There were cheers all around at Dad's suggestion.

"Greek?" I asked. What else? I thought.

"I was thinking Chinese," he said with a big smile.

"Chinese it is," I said happily.

Didn't I tell you? Never argue with a Kontos.



Questions for Christine

There are lots of kids with diabetes. Many people don't know what diabetes is all about. Maybe you have a question, too.

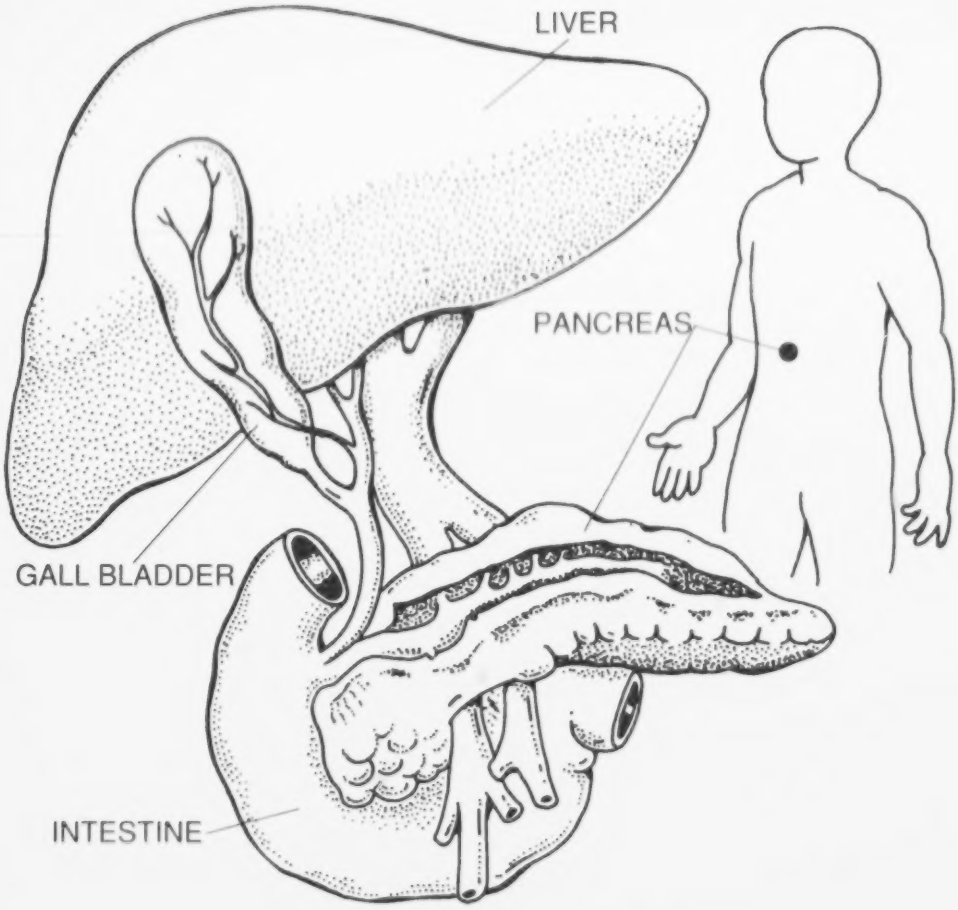
Q. What is diabetes?

A. The best way to tell you about diabetes is to describe how your body uses food to do all the things a body likes to do. When you have diabetes, it means your body cannot use food in the regular way. Let me explain.

Just like your family's car, your own body needs fuel to run properly. Of course, you can't just fill up at the pump. Your body gets its fuel from the food you eat. Your body turns the food you eat into fuel for energy: energy for growing, thinking, playing, dreaming; energy for everything you do. That's why it's really important to eat right. If your body doesn't get food, it runs out of steam, and if it doesn't get the right food, it won't run properly. "Remember," my doctor tells me, "you are what you eat."

The way the body turns food into fuel for energy is called "metabolism." There are different kinds of fuels, but one of the most important is called "glucose" or "sugar."

Have you ever heard of the pancreas? Probably not, but you would have if you had diabetes. The pancreas, an organ near the stomach and intestines, makes something called "insulin." Insulin helps the body make use of the sugar it needs for fuel. It helps turn the sugar in your blood into the energy your body (and everybody!) needs. This way, insulin helps to keep just the right amount of sugar in the blood.



See, the amount of sugar in your body is not always the same. There's more sugar in your blood after a meal, when your body has loaded up its fuel supply. There's less sugar in your blood after exercise, when your body is using up its fuel supply. The pancreas makes just the right amount of insulin for your body: more if your blood sugar level is high and less if it is low. It helps you keep the levels of insulin and sugar in balance.

But when you have the kind of diabetes I do, the pancreas doesn't make any insulin or just doesn't make enough. The body can't turn sugar into energy. The level of sugar in the blood gets too high—and you get sick. Several years ago, I began to lose weight. It seemed like I was thirsty, really thirsty, and hungry all the time. And I had to urinate a lot. (I mean, I really *had* to go.) When the doctor tested the sugar level in my blood, he found out I had diabetes.

Q. Is there a cure?

A. There is no cure, but there are ways to treat diabetes. My doctor tells me that the main idea in treating diabetes is to keep my metabolism in balance. That means that I must get the right amount of food, exercise, and insulin to keep my sugar at just the right level. If I eat too many sweets, or get too little exercise, or don't take enough insulin, the sugar in my blood will get too high, and I'll get sick. But I'll also get sick if the sugar in my blood gets too low. If I miss a meal, there won't be enough sugar in my blood for my regular dose of insulin.

It may seem like I can't win. But I can be a winner if I do three things: give myself shots of insulin, eat a balanced diet, and get regular exercise. If I do that, I'll be able to do just about everything I want to do, even with diabetes. Lots of people do. Famous people like Catfish Hunter, the baseball player. Or Mary Tyler Moore, a television star. And lots and lots of people who aren't famous, too. Like me. (I'm not famous—yet!)

Q. Why is exercise so important?

A. When I exercise, my body uses more sugar for energy. That helps the insulin do its job, and I am able to keep my daily dose of insulin low. Besides, exercise is good for everyone.

Q. Why do you give yourself shots of insulin?

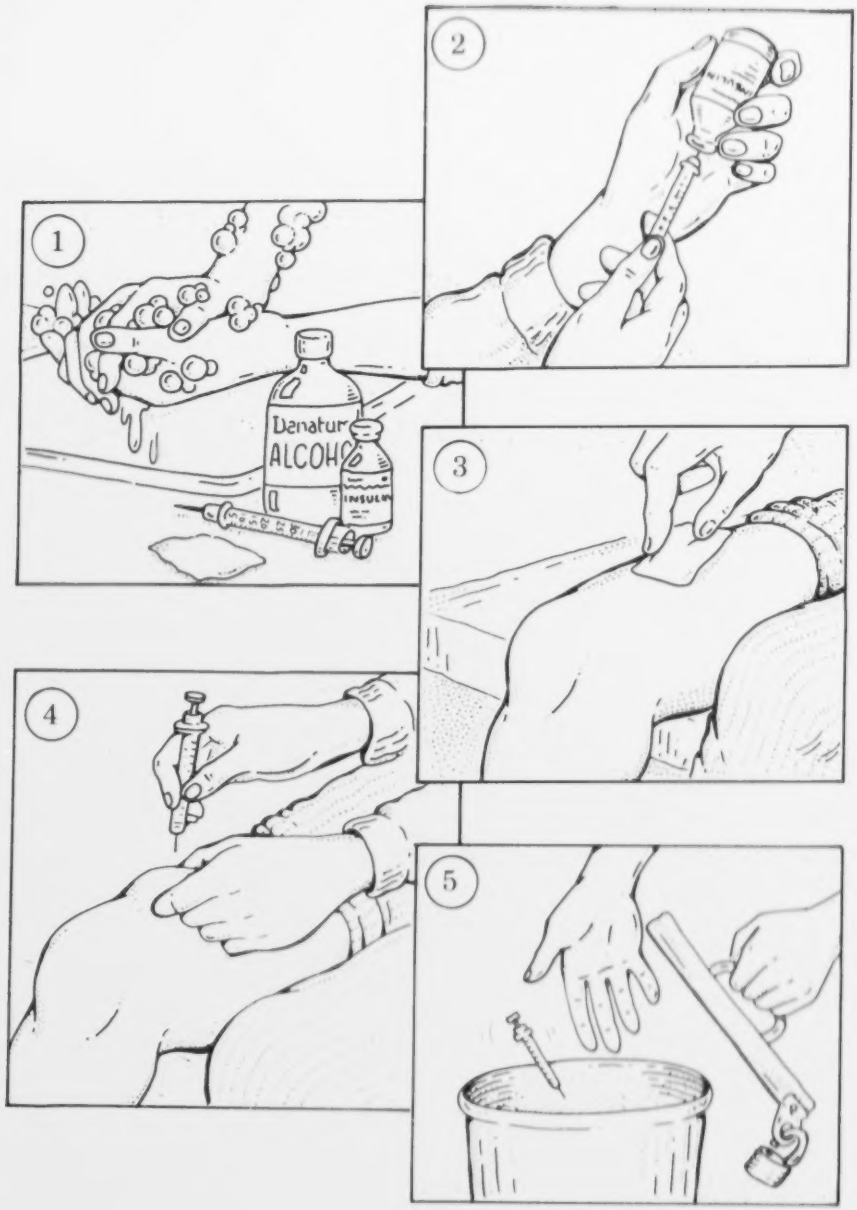
A. Because my pancreas doesn't make enough insulin, I have to add insulin to my body myself. I give myself a shot or injection of insulin two times a day, once before breakfast and once before dinner. This insulin helps my body use the sugar in my blood and keeps it at a healthy level, just like the insulin made by your pancreas.

But it doesn't work exactly the same way. If you don't have diabetes, your pancreas makes just the right amount of insulin depending on what your body needs. But I have to be careful that my insulin dose and sugar level are right for one another. That's why watching my diet and getting regular exercise are so important to me.

Q. How can you give yourself shots? Isn't it disgusting?

A. At first it was, and scary, too. But now it doesn't bother me at all. When I was very little, my Mom and Dad gave me the shots. Then, I went to a special camp for kids who have diabetes, where I learned how to do it myself. I remember when I first showed Ari how I give myself a shot. I thought he was going to faint. But it's not so bad. This is what I do:

- I get all the stuff I need: a syringe, my insulin, and cotton balls with alcohol on them. I use a real syringe and a real needle, just like doctors and nurses do.
- I wash my hands, and clean the insulin bottle with a cotton ball. It's important to keep everything I need super clean, including me.
- I put the needle into the bottle and fill the syringe with the proper dose of insulin.
- I pick a spot on my skin where I'm going to give myself the shot. It might be my arm, or leg, or stomach. I pick different spots for different days. If I picked the same spot all the time, it would get very sore.
- I wipe the spot with a cotton ball and some alcohol. The alcohol kills germs that can cause an infection.
- I pinch the skin to make a little bulge or fold.
- I put the needle into the fold of skin, then I let go of the pinch of skin, and I push down on the syringe. The insulin goes into my body.
- I take the needle out carefully and wipe the spot of skin with alcohol again.
- I throw the syringe away in a trash can I keep locked.
- That's all! Now, I'm ready to go. See: that wasn't so bad, was it?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Q. Doesn't it hurt?

A. Not if you do it right. It just feels like a little pinch. But it's very important to remember that giving yourself a shot is not a game. You should never play with a real needle, and never, never handle a used or dirty needle.

Q. Can you get AIDS from using a needle?

A. Not from one of my needles. You can get the AIDS virus or other diseases by using a needle that someone else has already used. And that is why you should never use or play with a dirty needle. When I'm done with my shot, I throw it away in a safe place. The life of that needle is over!

Q. How did you get diabetes?

A. That's a good question. A lot of people think you can get diabetes by eating too much candy or drinking too much soda. Well, you can't get diabetes that way, but you sure can get a ton of cavities!

There are two kinds of diabetes. I have the kind of diabetes children mostly get, where the pancreas doesn't make insulin. No one knows for sure how you get diabetes. Doctors think the kind of diabetes I have may be caused by two things. One is heredity. That means the chance of getting diabetes is passed along in a family from one generation (like my grandparents) to another (like my parents) to another (like me). It doesn't mean

that everyone in a family will get diabetes, but you're more likely to get it if it "runs" in your family.

But there is more to getting it than just heredity. My kind of diabetes may be caused by a virus infection, a virus that hurts the body's immune system. (The immune system is the way your body fights infections.) Perhaps one day we'll know for sure. But what *is* important to know is that you won't catch diabetes by being near someone who has it. So you don't have to be afraid of getting close. I can't give you diabetes.

Q. Why can't you eat candy and other sweet things?

A. I wish I could. But sweets like candy, cake, cookies, soda, and ice cream will raise the level of sugar in my blood too high. When *you* eat a lot of sweets, your pancreas starts pumping out the insulin to turn all that sugar into energy. But *I* have to keep my blood sugar level at the right amount for my dose of insulin, not too high and not too low. That means I have to pay careful attention to my diet. I eat a nutritious, well-balanced diet. That would be good for you, too!

If I eat too many sweets, I get sick. It's kind of a pain. I mean, how would you like to go to a party and worry about the cake and ice cream? But I got used to it, and so did my friends. With a little planning, I don't have to miss out at all. I remember at Diane's birthday party, her mother made an angel food cake, which is low in sugar. That was a nice surprise. And these days, everybody's drinking sugar-free soft drinks.

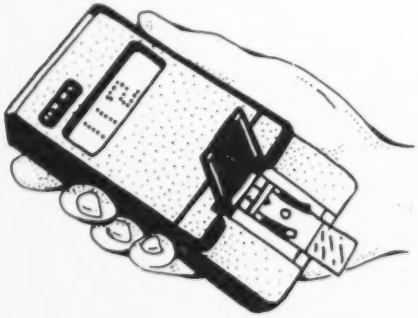
Sometimes, I bring my own food with me. Have you ever tried carrot sticks at the movies instead of candy? I know what you're thinking, but give it a try: they really taste good, even to a sweet tooth like me.

Q. But once you needed emergency candy. Why?

A. I know it may sound strange, but sometimes I need to eat something sugary real fast. I give myself a shot of insulin twice a day to help turn my blood sugar into body fuel. But what if I forget to eat or if I exercise more than usual? Then, there's *too little* sugar in my body and *too much* insulin. This is called an "insulin reaction." I get dizzy and sweaty, and if I don't eat something sweet right away, I could get real sick. So I keep candy with me just in case. That's what Joanne calls the "candy cure."

Q. But how do you know if your sugar level is right?

A. You can tell if you have a high sugar level by testing your blood. I test my blood two or three times a day by pricking my finger to get a tiny bit of blood. I wipe the blood on a special test strip and use a special meter to test for the result. It might look like this:



This way, I can tell if I am getting just the right amount of insulin and exercise, and eating the right kinds of food, to keep the sugar in my blood at a safe level. And I keep a record of my blood test results to show the doctor. If there is a problem, my doctor may want to adjust my insulin dose.

Q. Is it hard to have diabetes?

A. Sure, sometimes it's hard. Most kids don't have to worry about eating just the right food at the right time. That can be real hard. Shots are no great thrill, either. Believe me, if I had the choice, I would choose *not* to give myself two shots every day. There are some things I may not be able to do when I grow up, like fly airplanes.

And I don't like being teased at all.

But after a while, you get used to treating your diabetes. It just becomes a part of your life that you don't think about that much. Oh, every now and then I get a craving for a hot fudge sundae, but I don't really feel like I'm missing out on anything important. I don't really want to fly airplanes anyway.

And what about the people who tease me? I figure they just don't understand. Sure, diabetes is different. But I try to explain that "different" isn't better or worse. There's something different about everyone. Being different is what makes me, *me*: it's what makes you, *you*. I just want to be the best *me* I can. And what do you want to be?

About The Kids on the Block

Founded in 1977 by Barbara Aiello, The Kids on the Block puppet program was formed to introduce young audiences to the topic of children with disabilities. Since then the goals and programs of The Kids on the Block have evolved and broadened to encompass a wide spectrum of individual differences and social concerns.

Barbara Aiello is nationally recognized for her work in special education. The former editor of *Teaching Exceptional Children*, Ms. Aiello has won numerous awards for her work with The Kids on the Block, including the President's Committee on Employment of the Handicapped Distinguished Service Award, the Easter Seal Communications Award for Outstanding Public Service, and the Epilepsy Foundation of America's Outstanding Achievement Award. Her puppets have appeared in all 50 states and throughout the world. In addition, over 1,000 groups in the United States and abroad make The Kids on the Block puppets an effective part of their community programs.

For More Information

The Kids on the Block
9385-C Gerwig Lane
Columbia, Maryland 21046
800-368-KIDS

American Diabetes Association
National Service Center
1660 Duke St.
Alexandria, VA 22314
1-800-ADA-DISC
Check the white pages of your telephone directory for local Affiliate of the American Diabetes Association.

Joslin Diabetes Center
1 Joslin Place
Boston, MA 02215
617-732-2514

Juvenile Diabetes Foundation,
The International Research Foundation
432 Park Ave., South
New York, NY 10016
1-800-JDF-CURE
Check telephone directory for local JDF Chapter.

National Diabetes Information Clearinghouse
Box NDIC
Bethesda, MD 20892
301-468-2162

Christine Kontos in

A Portrait Of Me

Christine's story is about Ellis Island and modern dance, Greek food and diabetes, old ways and new dreams. Most of all, it's about one young girl who finds, in her own past, a new beginning.

Other Books in

THE KIDS ON THE BLOCK BOOK SERIES

Business Is Looking Up
Featuring Renaldo Rodriguez
(visual impairment)

Hometown Hero
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